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ABSTRACT

A comparison is made between the tools of observation and research used by journalists to study society and the media, and the qualitative and clinical research tools used in the social and psychological sciences. The first part of the paper, a journalistic approach to sociology, traces the notion of the sociologist as a super-reporter using participant-observation methods as an example of efforts to make qualitative methods a legitimate research tool in social science. Next, the author touches on the risks and personal involvement necessary when using journalistic observation techniques and cites several examples of the extremes journalists go to in order to obtain certain kinds of information. Then the author discusses investigative reporting by journalists as well as sociologists into the nature and quality of the media. The uncovering of the Watergate scandal is listed as one example of investigative reporting using participant observation and ethnographic techniques. Several sociologists are cited for their ethnographic studies of communications and the media. In the last part of the paper, the author focuses on the differences and similarities in techniques used by both journalists and sociologists and concludes that many journalists and sociologists recognize that qualitative observations are more useful than quantitative, abstract approaches to understanding the human condition. (LH)

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JOURNALISTIC OBSERVATION AS A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHOD FOR SOCIOLOGY

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Journalism and sociology have long had a close relationship, and the journalistic reporter is in many ways a type of qualitative sociologist, especially when the journalist uses participant-observer techniques. The parallel approaches of journalists and sociologists in observing and describing social conditions and problems have helped establish both a public and research agenda through the years and a common arsenal of research tools and methods.

The early newspaper career of Robert Park in Minneapolis and New York was a base for his first observations as an urban sociologist and his notion of the sociologist as a super-reporter using participation-observation. His later probes into the nature of news as knowledge reflected a qualitative search for community through communications. (White 1962:160-162)

When Park joined sociologists at the new University of Chicago, he urged his students to go beyond the musty library books and "get

the seat of your pants dirty in real research" via "first hand observation." The ex-reporter said "Go and sit in the lounges of the luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of the flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and on the slum shakedowns; sit in Orchestra Hall and in the Star and Garter Burlesk."(McKinney 1966:71) Students were assigned like investigative reporters to "explore the city on foot--to walk around various neighborhoods, occasionally talking to people they meet and recording their observations afterward in detail . . ." so as to develop "ingenious ways" to get the city to reveal its secrets. (Carey 1975: 155, 178)

The new University of Chicago at one stage appeared ready to train journalists along with social workers and ministers (Oberschall 1972:211), and "The Chicago School" of sociology became identified also with the literary naturalists, often former newsmen, whose observation techniques and frames of reference created novels as a kind of sociological research on "social worlds" with "life history data". (Carey 1975:179)

A legacy of qualitative research methods developed among sociologists and journalists in the Chicago tradition.(Burd 1981) Their kinship as academic and professional "cousins" has not been loudly proclaimed. One explanation for this silence is that the humanizing experiences of journalists and others "have contributed heavily to sociology, but 'respectable', 'establishment' sociologists know that identification with such folks often impairs an image calculated to attract foundation grants and contracts for research as well as academic employment and advancement within the sociological field." (Lee 1978:70)

Also, graduate students after World War II were considered to be cautious about research evaluation and risks in passion and nonconformity as they were "more in touch with 'scholarly opinion' about their subject than with their own feelings, intuitions and relevance."(Solotaroff 1961:490) Nevertheless, the qualitative paths of journalists and sociologists have frequently criss-crossed.

In France in the 1840's, Frederick LePlay looked at social problems with reportorial techniques. Paul Lazarsfeld in Vienna had his students go out and study what really happens. C. Wright Mills lamented the lack of sociological imagination among "research technicians of abstracted empiricism" and he urged students to "use your life experience in your intellectual work".(Mills 1959:105,196)

The "joint traditions" of journalism and sociology have a long and intimate history and "grew out of each other and nurtured each other", in the opinion of sociologist Daniel Lerner, himself considered a "hard-nosed behaviorist".(Lerner 1968:250-251) That idea holds that American sociology "really grew out of the womb of journalism" as muckrakers motivated sociology students in the Chicago School, which was "essentially journalistic" and whose topics (street corner society, the ghetto, crime, gangs) are still the staples of journalism today. (Lerner 1968:250-251)

Lerner said his book The Passing of Traditional Society was "good journalistic reporting", and that "Always the basic techniques (of journalists and sociologists) were essentially journalistic---- interviewing people and recording what they said. To which one (the social scientist) adds only those elements of systematic control and comparison that distinguish social research when it's good from jour-

nalism when it's good. Journalism simply doesn't use that apparatus of control technique; that's perhaps the critical difference." (Lerner 1968:252) Nevertheless, journalistic description collects detail, variety, specificity and novelty, and "Journalists as field observers are able to capture the vitality of the city, and to record new directions in community development in advance of most social science."(Bensman and Vidich 1975:4)

Journalists,who use qualitative and/or participant observation techniques in observing society and sometimes its communications media, may not think of themselves as sociologists, but they in fact may be practicing sociology from the elementary "participation" of travel to complexities in planned and unplanned involvement in both routine and posed situations.

Journalistic travelogues reveal and report the nature of the society: Paul's letters to early Christians; Mark Twain's reflections along The Mississippi; Lewis and Clark's journals on The Northwest; DeTcqueville's trek across America; Darwin's island impressions on the origin of the species; Steinbeck's and Gulliver's travels; Charles Kuralt and Jack Kerouac "on the road"; and Bill Moyers listening to America and William Buckley sailing across the South Atlantic.

Other journalists at work "in the line of duty" have inadvertently become part of their story as reporters report reporters who were arrested, robbed, pickpocketed, mugged, or caught in riots and revolutions. Involvement in the story both helped to obtain the story and to add an extra dimension to it.(MacDougall 1968)

Working reporters have been caught in hurricanes, tornadoes,

floods, earthquakes and other natural disasters. They have observed "on the scene" historical events and written of their own, unplanned experiences of accidents, illness, rare surgery, heart attacks, alcoholism and cancer. They have taken balloon rides, LSD, and diets; tried ESP, sexual deviance and dope; and posed as mental patients, welfare clients, illegal aliens, substitute teachers; and gone covertly "underground" to experience the social worlds of religious sects and closed cults; and risked survival in bomb shelters and wilderness tests--all in order to obtain qualitative research data from participant observation.

Journalist George Plimpton has made a career out of gathering information in such a manner. He played pro football and tennis very briefly, boxed professionally for a short time, was an Olympic swimmer, lion tamer, trapese artist, actor, stand-up comic, and conducted and played in a symphony orchestra. In a more sublime manner, Edgar Snow lived among the Chinese more than 50 years in order to understand and write about them for national U.S. magazines. He survived China's political and social turmoil and accusations of Communist sympathies in the 1950's, and died two weeks before he was to report for Life on President Nixon's China visit in 1972. (Snow, 1937-1972)

Participatory journalists will frequently take great risk to obtain information not otherwise available. Hunter S. Thompson was seriously injured while riding with Hell's Angels to obtain inside experienced information on the group. Television reporter Michael Prokes became a true believer and media spokesman for The People's Temple of Rev. James Jones after setting out to do an expose in 1972, but he killed himself during a press conference when he could not

face the fact he had been led astray.(Newsweek 1979:53) The Chicago Sun-Times in 1977 even bought a tavern and its reporters and photographers operated it to obtain information on city inspection bribes and tax fraud by observing daily routines of suspects.(Shah 1978:86)

The so-called "New Journalism" of the 1960's was a type of participation observation by writers who often wove their interaction with interviewees and news sources into their stories. Many found they could not stay in "objective" newsrooms and do such "subjective" writing, so they found outlets in novels and other media of the times. How far the establishment press can allow such style and creativity to report "social worlds" was indicated when the Washington Post in 1981 returned its Pulitzer Prize for a realistic (but fabricated composite) feature profile on a boy heroin addict.

As a revolt against journalistic conventions and in search of social reality, these journalists are on the border of both sociology and journalism and observation and analysis: (Hellmann 1977:430)

> "The new journalist exploits the transformational resources of human perception and imagination to seek out a fresher and more complete experience of an event and to then make a literary construct, a fiction, which communicates that experience with something approaching the wholeness and resonance it has had for him. Thus, the new journalist typically approaches his subject matter either from the vantage point of a relentless witness and detective (Capote, Hersey), from that of an involved participant (Mailer, Thompson, Plimpton) or from the inside of the subjects themselves (Wolfe,Talese). Above all, the new journalist wishes to use his imaginative powers and fictional craft to seek out and construct truth."

Journalism has also been at the border in other ways where worlds "out there" have gained or sought entry to a larger public. Even the pseudo-events,often created by the observed in order to persuade the observer to create news,involves a type of participation and research. And the media expose, as in Watergate, both created and unleashed participant-journalists revealing their inside experiences on the state of the society at that time.

The use of participant observation and related qualitative reporting tools is not emphasized in most journalism training texts, which continue to dwell on the tradition of objective reporting. While it captures "facts and feelings" that "otherwise would remain unknown", it raises problems of privacy invasion and difficulty in generalizing, and although "a good tool", it is limited and "works best as a supplement to the standard techniques of interviewing and examining documents." (Brooks et al 1980:371-372)

More advanced journalism texts and those encouraging investigative reporting tend to give such methods more legitimacy and are guides to both journalists and sociologists doing field observation. In fact, investigative social research and aspects of qualitative sociology methods overlap with journalistic techniques.(Douglas 1976, Schwartz and Jacobs 1979) One handbook on reporting methods (McCombs et al 1976) could be a bible for sociologists as reporters and vice versa. Although with a strong behavioral context, it deals with field interviewing, use of documents and records, the qualitative presentation of quantitative data, and use of participant-observation.

On the last, it reminds prospective media reporters that this technique provides a wholistic view of humans in their settings and

discovers natural behavior. It points out that this method requires lots of time to observe both frequency and duration of behavior, that it involves dangers in loyalty whether entrance is infiltration or disclosure, that special efforts must be made to minimize reactive effects and selective distortions, and that the observer still cannot depend on the method to fully understand the observed. (McCombs et al 1976:211-243)

Research and reporting methods listed exclusively for investigative reporting do not emphasize the obtaining of information via participation-observation. Violating any laws or rules to get data tends to be discouraged, partly because the reporter already is presented as a defender of the system. The role of the reporter is that of an aggressive, persistent watch-dog seeking out wrongdoing, secrecy, with a sense of moral outrage and concern for the people's "right to know". Such "jugular journalism" is taught as one of "documents and records research" on existing data which may be missing, with-held or concealed. (Anderson and Benjaminson 1978; Williams 1978; Mollenhoff 1978)

Journalists and those who teach journalism are not known for analyzing the nature and quality of the media or for using techniques of participant-observation to do so. There are some notable exceptions. Chicago reporters in the 1890's had a perspective of symbolic interactionism which linked them to the social scientists, but reporters never thought of their work in such terms. (Kreiling and Sims 1981) Park of course was the rare exception.

Even muckraking then and now is plagued with conceptual weaknesses as the few definitions have not won scholarly adherents.

"Vagueness hinders the discussion of attitudes, opinions and beliefs and of values and value systems allegedly held by muckrakers or by some other vaguely-identified aggregate (the public, the middle-class) in relation to muckraking." (Stein1979:17) Scholarly and qualitative studies of the media are rather recent in American schools of journalism. Sociological (media and society) perspectives became common only after about 1966 and qualitative approaches by the mid-1970's.

"Unfortunately, most people who do journalism have little time to think about it,"(emphasis in original) but critic George Seldes has for nearly a century matched his inside observations of media behavior with an outside perspective. Neither his practice nor his study of journalism wins prizes,(Dennis and Bertrand 1980-81) and criticism methods lag far behind both history and survey research as an established method for studying communications.

Journalists do not often systematically study the sociology of the media. They may reflect romantically on their past work or on occasion, as in the 1960s, reflect in journalism reviews on how stories got written, rejected, and as media ombudsmen explain to complaining readers and viewers how media function. The unhappy or fired media employee or the daring participant-observer sometimes reveals the sociological or other nature of communications. Some samples may be illustrative, although not necessarily representative.

Fred Friendly left CBS after disagreements over television of hearings on Viet Nam and wrote of how network policies are made in his "occupational memoir" Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control (1967). Washington Post writer Sally Quinn told of her efforts to become a CBS anchor woman in We're Going to Make You a Star(1975).

Robert Metz was not flattering in his network appraisal of Reflections in a Bloodshot Eye.

Former New York Times reporter Gay Talese revealed the inside of that newspaper in The Kingdom and The Power(1969), based upon his 10 years as employee, interviewer, and analyst of diaries, journals and family albums. His later participant-observer style led him to write of the Mafia and sexual mores. Timothy Crouse, reporter for The Rolling Stone, observed first hand journalists covering the 1972 presidential campaign in The Boys on the Bus, as he combined interviews with biographies, documents and direct observation.

The inside of the BBC was revealed in 1975 by Lord Reith's diaries, and former television reporter and presidential press secretary Ron Nessen in 1978 disclosed several vantage points on the media in his book It Sure Looks Different From The Inside. There are accounts of how a newspaper won a Pulitzer Prize for a series on water pollution (Lockwood 1967); how a history of the Village Voice was written (McAuliffe 1980); and even revelations of how the Progressive magazine was prohibited from printing a story on the H-Bomb (Knoll 1979), an untold story later a book by its free-lance author.

How the Watergate Scandal was covered by Woodward and Bernstein is described in their book on All The President's Men. They do not reflect a great deal on those methods, but scholars have suggested that such reporting methods are valid research techniques.(Levine 1980) "Investigative reporting has much in common with qualitative and clinical research in the social and psychological sciences . . . (although) the qualitative approach still has an uncertain methodo-

logical status and is denigrated by some as little more than a useful art form."(Levine 1980:626)

Such reporting, it is argued, combines participant-observation and field research as reporters "make it their business to immerse themselves in their stories, personally getting as close as possible to the events . . ." Thus, as in science, the more powerful control is not the research design, but the social control inherent in independent review, criticism and attempts at replication of the reported observations."(Levine 635,637) Such qualitative observations, it is suggested, are more useful than quantitative, abstract approaches to understanding the human condition, and deserve status as research:

> " . . .investigative reporting does have a discipline to it in that its results are grounded in evidence whose reliability is probed in a number of ways. The inference process is also limited by social controls. The method requires theory to guide interpretation, and it can result in concepts or models that have significance beyond the unique events for which they were developed."(Levine 637)

The use of journalistic observation as a qualitative research method to study both society and media appears more frequently used by sociologists than practicing journalists or communications scholars. A sociology of the press was the first priority for scientific study proposed to the First Congress of Sociologists in 1910 in Frankfurt, Germany by Max Weber, who urged a start with "scissors and compasses to measure the quantitative changes in newspaper content" before "we will proceed to qualitative" analyses.(Weber 1910, 1976)

Communication studies and scholarship in the U.S. came after craft and trade training near the turn of the century, and have been

dominated by quantitative social science geared to the mass market of the media, rather than critical, evaluative and qualitative approches. (Burd 1982) Landmark sociological studies were made by Warren Breed on social control in the newsroom (Breed 1955) and by Morris Janowitz on the community press (Janowitz 1952), and although the University of Chicago (where Janowitz teaches) did not institute professional journalism training, Park was re-discovered by communications researchers after he had been "overlooked until recently" as a "founder of the sociological study of mass communications and public opinion". (Frazier and Gaziano 1979:1)

The revival of interest in Park in the field of communications was concurrent with efforts to make qualitative approaches a legitimate research method in social science (Burd 1976), and confessions by quantitative research advocates of "methodological provincialism" and concessions that softer, participant-observation, non-mathematical, naturalistic methods could "uncover textures of meanings" and new insights "not otherwise obtainable" through traditional empirical methods with their "artificial settings and abstract typologies". (ICA 1979)

Sociologists have used qualitative methods to study journalism. Participant-observation and ethnographic techniques are among them. Bernard Roshco of the University of Chicago, a journalist turned sociologist, has studied news as "a sociological problem". (Roshco 1975) The "social history" of media objectivity has been looked at through the lens of sociology (Schudson 1978). Communicatinns researchers have been urged to get critically involved in their studies and to "get out of the car" (Katz 1979), and the first major, national

portrait of journalists, including their participant and neutral roles, was done by sociologists. (Johnstone et al 1976)

Sociologist Herbert Gans has studied "journalistic communities" in both urban and suburban settings and also participated and observed journalists at work and matched that with quantitative content analyses to determine how news decisions are made. (Gans 1979) Gaye Tuchman took field notes for 10 years, conducted interviews, and ,like Gans, sat in on editorial decision-making sessions and watched the processing of news assignments to understand how journalists construct reality. (Tuchman 1977)

Another sociologist, Mark Fishman, took notes as a novice reporter for seven months on a small California newspaper to observe how newsmen behave and manufacture news. (Fishman 1980) A political sociologist and journalist, Edward Epstein, got access to the internal workings of television networks to attend staff meetings, travel with camera crews, sit in on policy and off-the-record conferences, and see in-house records to produce his News From Nowhere in 1973.

Epstein argued that such direct observation was useful because content analyses and even historical research may not reveal media distortion of events whose coverage is beyond the means of academic researchers, and such events do not take place under controlled circumstances lending themselves to methodological analysis. Epstein's pioneer work (on how internal media organizational needs affect the external images of the world) was inspired by journalist Walter Lippmann's reminder a half-century before that "no American sociologist has ever written a book on newsgathering." (Epstein 1973:xi)

The internal interactions in the newsrooms of the New York Times and the Washington Post were used to study newsmaking and the relationship between Reporters and Officials by Leon Sigal in 1971. He also did extensive interviews and studied memoirs of journalists and politicians. In another internal study, Chris Argyris looked Behind The Front Page in a 1974 probe of the New York Times where he not only did interviews and attended staff meetings, but served as an "interventionist" and management expert on problems. (Sigal 1971, Argyris 1974)

Heavy involvement in the Students for a Democratic Society(SDS) by Todd Gitlin was used by that sociologist-journalist to study the media coverage of the New Left.(Gitlin 1980) He used organizational records and past contacts and "the suppleness of the qualitative 'literary' approach to cultural artifacts." He explains(Gitlin 303-304):

> "I wanted to 'tease out' those determining but hidden assumptions which in their unique ordering remain opaque to quantitative content analysis. At its best, qualitative analysis is more flexible than the quantitative kind; it aspires to a level of complexity. . that remains true to the actual complexity and contradictoriness of media artifacts. . . . . .the 'literary' choice emphatically does not amount to a choice of the intuitive against the objective. Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies rely on preliminary interrogations of the material, interrogations which proceed, at least implicitly, from 'intuitive' assumptions about what matters in the content, what needs to be either analyzed or counted."

Journalists know better than most that what is not in content is often more important than what was printed. Ethnographic research

goes beyond analysis of content to study working ideologies and social practices of producers of such content. This borderland between sociology and journalism was explored by Philip Schlesinger in his field work in the BBC's News Division in 1972-1976 as a "trainee sub-editor learning the tricks of the trade by talking to his more experienced editors." He defends that "ethnographic approach" as a "complementary approach to the various forms of textual analysis, and structural and historical studies of culture . . . . allied with interviews and some exceedingly limited access to internal documentation."(Schlesinger 1980:363)

Such methods also have been explored in research on usage of content by families as natural (television viewing) media audiences. Such ethnographic research "can be considered as part of an interpretive process whereby the investigator attempts to grasp the meaning of communicative events through the perceptions and shared assumptions of the social actors under scrutiny."(Lull 1979:13) It can also encourage an eclectic methodology incorporating case studies, participant-observation, interviews over time, surveys and diaries, media usage profiles, visual and auditory competence and demographics. (Traudt 1979)

Both journalists and sociologists are using visual communication technology (film, photos, cameras) as qualitative tools in reporting and social science.(Wagner 1979) Studies on non-verbal communication by Edward T. Hall (The Silent Language, 1959, and The Hidden Dimension, 1966, and Studs Terkel's oral histories are notable. Oral history is also matched with snapshots of families to detect feelings

and memories. (Taft 1938; Lesy 1980) Also, the "oral life history seems an effective instructional strategy for involving students in field work within their home communities" to produce both social science and literature. (Sitton 1981:125)

The camera has been used as a research tool for visual anthropology with the photographer as a participant-observer and a "can opener" into human organizations. (Collier 1967: 5, 13) Quantitative sociological ethnography has involved shooting pictures with sampling, reliability and validity (Stasz 1979), while qualitative concerns have been raised on how the immersed and culturally informed photographer might be exploitative and unethical. (Harper 1978)

There are numerous similarities, but also differences, among journalists and sociologists using journalistic observational tools. Journalists enjoy daily and hourly clients and audiences, and the legal and constitutional protections to enhance their access to information. They also have a special social role, a media policy which shapes the "domain"of their beat and guides their focus, selection and perception of a research or reporting effort.

While sociologists must appeal to a general scholarly or academic search for truth and new knowledge, journalists have their credentials and the mystique and mission and power to pierce secrecy, deceit, and the evasive "fronts" of gatekeepers. The media's "watchdog" function reinforces the role of the skeptic and "peeping tom" who gains access in "the public interest" and "the people's right to know". Sociologists have less social leverage via "education".

Journalists can gain bureaucratic entry via "leaks" which can

benefit both observer and observed, as the anonymous attributions to sources and places serve as convenient "footnotes". The press can use denials to access as "news" and that can often be used to force entry, especially if the image of hiding and secrecy is conveyed. Once inside, it is hard for organizations to re-establish secrecy, and any re-negotiation on sharing information can help the journalist as continuing researcher. Having the power and platform of publication, the press has a type of patronage sociologists lack.

Journalists can publish their findings relatively quickly without the stern refereeing from peers that scholars often experience. Libel suits and letters to editors, notwithstanding, journalists can usually escape criticism before publication, and afterwards, move on to the next story or assignment unhindered. The research obligations of the journalist are often fulfilled upon publication and the need for further generalization may not occur. It can be considered just another unique case and the next hunch, tip or hypothesis need not refute it.

Covert or overt field behavior by a journalist can be excused as he re-enters the more routine and stable job procedures, or he can re-cycle unused material in fiction, novels, memoirs, opinions, an exposé in a competing medium, or take on a new role by "going over to the other side" as long as the new role is clear.

Journalists doing field research have the advantage of the policy and editorial concepts which define "the story" and thereby circumscribe the research site and setting. This is further reinforced by the economic and professional realities of time, space, media technology and competition. Sociologists are more dependent

on definition of research needs by the academy and sponsors which may not share an institutional tradition like that in the media.

Both journalists and qualitative sociologists wrestle with the problems of subjectivity and observation. Journalists use it as a cloak for an attitude, a belief and a dedication to truth and honesty as often as they are tested and challenged by others. The writer's byline can be added to excuse subjective overtones. Malicious intent or self-interest are often hard to prove--especially in court. The credibility and privilege inherent in media lore and law provide a psychological and insitutional safety net for the journalist whose qualitative research attempts may be considered too subjective.

While sociologists may be challenged by replication, a reporter can define his participation-observation as a job in news gathering. For both, reportorial skills can sharpen observation. Both are often seeking out what is really happening through first hand involvement in social worlds (Filstead 1970) back stage, beyond facades and in "smoke-filled rooms". They also share the mission of the detective (Sanders 1974) piecing together fragments of "the story".

Both qualitative approaches are receptive to flexible and multiple methods (triangulation) with quantitative data supplementing qualitative, critical, interdisciplinary contexts combining theory and methodology. Some of the same skepticism on direct observation is shared. Journalists tend to use participant-observation, for example, when all other methods of research may have failed to produce "the story". Sociologists also face the problems of time, costs, danger, anxiety, lack of legitimacy from peers, lack of rules and comparability of rich, idiosyncratic data, and the degrading exper-

ience of humble field work which may not produce a news story or a new insight into sociology.

Journalistic reporting and research appears to be a kind of qualitative sociology with similarities in tools and strategies. (Burd and Snow 1983) It uses the data sources of direct experience (by the reporter), recording what people do and say, checking documents and other records, and noting physical traces of past action. It uses the techniques of interviewing (listening and conversing), both historical and content analyses, and inspection of physical materials.

Journalistic tactics to gain access are similar to those in field sociology: develop contacts, ties, friends; get by the gatekeepers, "case the joint", and acquire intermediaries. Add to that a healthy skepticism making archives, files and past stories problematic, with double-checking of actions against words and observation of non-verbal communication. In addition, the use of many informants and sources can allow the playing of one against the other in some cases to "smoke out" rumors and contradictions; and the routine of the "beat" allows interviews over time in conversation, groups, and in semi-directed and semi-structured situations both on and off-the-record.

Qualitative journalists and sociologists have shown that they can reveal how the media and society function beyond content analysis, history and survey research, as they discover how both media and society are viewed by those who produce the content, the history and the responses to the questionnaires.

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